The Indians of Washtenaw County

By John Hinchey with Grace Shackman

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For 11,000 years the area's earliest residents were able to adapt to dramatic shifts in climate. But within two decades after the shite settlers' arrival, their culture had vanished with barely a trace.

Indians had been living in the area that is now Washtenaw County for over eleven thousand years before a French trader named Gabriel Godfroy established the first Indian trading post in 1809, and laid the groundwork for the first European settlement in what is now Ypsilanti. Located on the west bank of the Huron River at the intersection of several Indian trails, the post was known simply as "Godfroy's on the Potawatomie Trail." The Ojibwa (Chippewa), Ottawa, and Hurons all had some claim to this territory, but the principal claimants were the Potawatomie, then at the height of their tribal and territorial growth. They inhabited vast tracts of land in what is now Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan.

The Indians had a communal concept of land use. When the tribes signed the Treaty of Detroit in 1807, which ceded most of southeastern Michigan to the U.S. in return for $10,000, they thought they were agreeing to share the land with the settlers; but as more settlers moved in to the territory and sharing seemed unlikely, the Indians voluntarily started to move away. They removed all their permanent villages shortly after the 1816 government land survey. By 1820, Godfroy had to move his post farther west to stay in contact with the Indians.

Washtenaw County was surveyed in 1822. The first settlements were established in 1823 at Woodruff's Grove, a mile southeast of Godfroy's, and in 1824 at Ann Arbor. In 1825, a group led by Judge Augustus Woodward of Detroit bought Godfroy's land and planned the village of Ypsilanti. When settlers

arrived in Washtenaw over the next few years, the Indians were still numerous, but they were either remnant groups - an occasional hunting party or seasonal camp drawn to the white settlements by the prospect of trade - or individual Indians seeking shelter or food. The early settlers' most common reference to Indians has to do with large groups from the west moving through the county on their annual treks to Fort Malden in Ontario to receive their annuities from the British for service in the War of 1812.

The early settlers benefited from the Indians' presence. When John Allen and Elisha Rumsey left Detroit to found Ann Arbor, they followed the Sauk Indian Trail (US-12 today). They traded with the Indians for enough food so that a long trek back to Detroit for provisions was unnecessary. Still, they saw the Indians chiefly as hostiles to be pacified rather than as neighbors whose friendship should be cultivated. There is no record of Indian hostility in these years, but according to a county history included in Everts' and Stewart's 1874 Combination Atlas Map of Washtenaw County, Indians were "troublesome." Major Benjamin Woodruff, one of the original settlers of Woodruff's Grove, had consulted the illustrious Governor Lewis Cass about this problem. Cass, who consistently portrayed himself as the Indians' chief benefactor when negotiating with them, advised Woodruff to "tie up the offenders and whip them" if they "misbehaved." This advice was followed the next time the Indians made trouble (the nature of the offense is not specified), and it is said "from that time onward no trouble was experienced with their red neighbors."

Even though the local Indians were not hostile, most early settlers anticipated hostilities, and this colored their perception of the Indians. Except when they came to trade, the Indians' persistent efforts to establish friendly relations with their white neighbors were rebuffed and regarded as a nuisance. The ethic of sharing is a central principle of almost all Indian cultures, and this principle encompasses

all things, including goods, shelter, and food. Few white settlers, here and elsewhere, bothered to avail themselves of Indians' generosity. One who did was the Eastern journalist Charles Hoffmann. His letters about a trip to Michigan in 1833 were published with the title-A Winter in the West. Hoffman so impressed the Ottawa chief whose camp near Saline he often visited that he was invited to join the tribe and take the chief's sister as his wife. The Indians, for their part, were not at all shy about seeking a meal or a night's shelter from neighboring whites when they needed it. These overtures frequently roused a settler's hostility, especially when the husband was not home. According to Mary H. Clark's "Pioneer Mothers of Michigan," which appeared in Godey's Ladies' Book in 1852, when Indians showed up at the home of the famous Ann Rumsey, wife of Elisha Rumsey, she assumed a stern and commanding air, flourished a broom at them, and bade them begone. An account in Chapman's 1881 History of Washtenaw County tells how a Mrs. Dillon of Ann Arbor repeatedly ordered an Indian away but finally yielded to his requests for food by giving him a piece of bread and butter. Something aroused the Indian's suspicions, and when Mrs. Dillon refused to taste the bread herself, the Indian threw the bread on the ground and departed. The Indian's suspicions were most likely ungrounded, but it is not hard to see how Mrs. Dillon's manner led the Indian to suspect her.

Sometimes the white settlers did offer hospitality to the Indians. Ira Seymour settled in southern Webster township in 1827, and his son, C.B. Seymour, recalls his father's expert handling of the Indians in a memoir included in the Michigan Pioneer Collections.

-"My father's kindness and great firmness controlled them from the first. If they came to his house hungry, he always gave them food. If they came and wanted shelter, he always found accommodations for them if possible. They knew it and appreciated it. I have many times seen, on a cold stormy night, as many Indians sleeping on our kitchen floor as could pack themselves into the room. You can well understand that there was much that was far from being pleasant at such times; but my father was a humane gentleman, ever ready to show kindness to anyone in need, and this feeling of friendship on the part of the Indians was no slight addition to the feelings of security which we all shared."

Clearly, the white settlers did not get to know the Indians as well as they might have, although there was little left to get to know even when they arrived. The steady Indian migration away from the area continued as more white settlers arrived, and in the mid 1830's the U.S. began enforcing in earnest the Indian Removal Act of 1830. By 1840, the Indians were all but completely departed from the county. Most Indians were allowed to return to their tribes' territorial centers in northern Michigan and in Canada, but the Potawatomie territory, in the Kalamazoo area, lay squarely along the settlers' main route through Indiana and Illinois, and they were ordered to remove to Kansas. Less than half the Potawatomie moved west by 1837, and those who had were discouraged by the unsuitability of the Kansas plains to their semi-nomadic life of hunting, fishing, and farming. Many secretly returned to their homelands, where their people were living at subsistence level in small clan-villages that had to keep constantly on the move to avoid detection by settlers. In 1840, the U.S. finally gathered the remaining Potawatomie together and escorted them on a "force March" to Kansas. Many were killed attempting to escape, but many did get away. Between 1837 and 1845 large numbers of Polawatomie migrated to western Ontario, to northern Michigan, and to Walpole Island on the Canadian side of Lake St. Clair, where they were welcomed by Ojibwa living on a reservation granted to them by the British. A few Potawatomie managed to make their way back to Michigan from Kansas, and, with the unexpected help of local white settlers, bought land near Athens in Calhoun County. The small 120-acre reserve is still held in trust for the Potawatomie by the state of Michigan. The Canadian reservation on Walpole Island also remains, with a sizaable Potawatomie population today. There are now four Indian reservations in Michigan, three in the Upper Peninsula and one a few miles east of Mount Pleasant.

The history of the Michigan Indian tribes is far from complete but the history of Indian communities in Washtenaw County has been closed for almost 150 years. It is a story about

which we know very little. Most of what we do know has been discovered by archaeologists. Most of the archaeological information on Washtenaw County comes from accidental finds by road crews and farmers. The last intensive work done in Washtenaw County was a survey in 1976 of the River Raisen in Pittsfield Township. The richest archaeological sites for exploration lie in other areas in the state. Since most artifacts of Indian life are found within two inches of the surface of the ground, there is little chance of finding much in a highly developed area like Ann Arbor. Most of the Indian artifacts found in Ann Arbor are chert projectile points, along with a smaller number of chert flakes, stone tools, pottery fragments, fire-cracked rocks from ancient hearths, bone remains, and even squash seeds. Because of the haphazard manner by which materials have been collected from Ann Arbor sites, their archaeological value is limited. Farmers who collected artifacts over a period of decades recorded little about the geological context of the materials and their spatial relation to each other and the rest of the site. An understanding of the prehistoric Indians of this area depends almost entirely upon the way findings here conform to what archaeologists have learned about Indians in other parts of Michigan and throughout the Great Lakes area.

Archaeologists are fairly confident that they understand certain basic features of Indian prehistory in Michigan. They believe that Indians arrived here soon after the retreat of the last glaciers nearly 12,000 years ago. They soon developed a diverse economy of hunting, fishing, and gathering, constantly adapting to changing climatic conditions. The climate did not stabilize until some time after 3500 B.C., when an essentially modern environment was formed. Cultivated crops- that archaeologists call "cultigens" - first appear in Michigan around 600 B.C. At first, the principle crop was squash. Beans and corn appeared much later. Not until the "Late Woodland" period (500-1600 A.D.) did cultigens begin to play a decisive role in the Indian economy and affect settlement systems and social organizations.

Indian life flourished in this period, abetted by a warm, moist climatic period that lasted from 800-1300 A.D. During this period, different groups of Michigan Indians got along well with each other. Each had its own niche in the region. The Indians of central Michigan were traders who lived in agricultural villages; their trading patterns with their hunting and fishing neighbors to the north and their hunting and farming neighbors to the south enabled each group to acquire desirable products from another's area (fur, for instance, or corn) in a peaceful manner.

The large populations and thriving economies in this period were in large part invigorated by the then-flourishing Mississippian culture centered near St. Louis, Missouri. Michigan Indians were probably influenced by the population centers of this culture and appear to have carried on extensive trade with them. In fact, archaeologists believe that one of the principal reasons for the quick success of the European fur trade was that it superimposed itself on already existing Indian trade systems. Just as early historic exchanges typically went from Ojibwa to Ottawa to Huron to the French, so in prehistoric times did Upper Peninsula furs go to Indians in southern Michigan for corn, and then to Mississippian Indians for ornamental collars made of shells or for shell-tempered pottery.

This cultural network broke down with the return of cooler, drier conditions around 1300 A.D. which reduced tremendously the agricultural productivity of northern Indians. Populations in northern areas dramatically decreased as a result. Trade revived a bit with the return of a warmer climate between 1450 and 1550 A.D. but broke down again with the onset of what has been called the "Little Ice Age," which lasted from 1550 until 1880 A.D. Farming peoples of southern Michigan moved south into Ohio, where winters were milder. The trading tribes in the middle of the state moved eastward into Canada, and the hunters of the north, no longer attracted by much demand for their furs and skins, moved to the more abundant hunting grounds in Central Canada. Except for southwestern Michigan, the entire state became mostly a buffer

zone between large Indian groups, visited by hunting and fishing parties of many tribes, but serving as homeland for none. Michigan's most notable archaeological feature of the centuries just before the Europeans' arrival in the early seventeenth century is the high density of burial sites. James Fitting writes in The Archaeology of Michigan, "Very likely the people had base villages somewhere else... Southeastern Michigan seems to have been a place where people went to die or were taken to be buried rather than a place where they lived . . . At several (archaeological sites) there are more people than pots."

When the first French explorers and traders arrived on Michigan's Great Lakes shores in the 1620s, they encountered members of four tribes: the Ojibwa or Chippewa, the Ottawa, and Potawatomie (all members of the Algonquin language group), and the Hurons, who were Iroquois.

The Potawatomie were centered on the western shore of Lake Michigan in the early historic period, but in the late seventeenth century they began moving into southwestern Michigan along the St. Joseph River, where they displaced the Miami. In summer, the women grew beans, peas, squash, tobacco, melons, and corn, while the men hunted near the villages. In winter, the entire village would relocate to new territory for hunting.

The Indian population of southeastern Michigan increased greatly in 1701 when Cadillac (Antoine Laumet) established a fort at Detroit as part of the French strategy to prevent the Indian trade from falling into the hands of the English. Cadillac urged all four major Michigan tribes to move to Detroit, both to serve as allies against the English and to exploit the hunting resources of southern Michigan. By 1703 all four tribes had set up villages near the fort at Detroit.

These settlements at Detroit were a major influence on the Indian presence in Washtenaw County in the century before John Allen established his tavern at the corner of what is

now Main and Huron. The Potawatomie migrated into the territory which lay between their villages on the St. Joseph and their new village in Detroit, and they became the predominent tribe in Washtenaw County. The Hurons established their tribal center in the area around Detroit, extending into Ypsilanti, where they maintained a village. The Chippewa and Ottawa maintained their tribal centers in northern Michigan, but like all the other so-called "Detroit Indians," they seem to have used the regions west of Detroit as hunting grounds. The Ojibwa called the area "wash-ten-ong" or "the place beyond."

We know very little about the mode of life of the Washtenaw County Indians in these years between 1701 and the early nineteenth century, since their way of life was rapidly changing through contact with the whites. This process had begun even before many of these tribes had ever encountered Europeans. European diseases to which the Indians lacked immunity, especially smallpox, spread well ahead of the wave of settlers. Some tribes, like the Ojibwa, acquired and became dependent on the white man's metal knives and pots and vermilion before ever having direct contact with a white trader. The Michigan Indians' involvement in the fur trade and in European wars profoundly disrupted the economic and social balance of their cultures in ways we can only guess at. The disruptions need not have been destructive. The Indians had been adapting and re-adapting to changing conditions and opportunities ever since they arrived in Michigan, but they did get the chance to assimilate and respond to these new conditions on their own terms.

By the time the first white settlers arrived in Washtenaw County, the local Indians were in the last stages of losing the struggle to find some ground upon which they could begin to build a future for themselves in a rapidly changing world.

For their part, most of Washtenaw County's early settlers seem to have regarded it as inevitable and best that the Indians would simply disappear. Indians figure in early accounts chiefly as a nuisance to be controlled or as a curious diversion.

We know that Pontiac's nephew Okemos used to frequent Daniel Brown's store on Main Street until he played a prank on one of Brown's clerks, which made him an unwelcome customer. Thereafter he took his business to Edward Clark's rival store on the other side of Main Street. We know that Clark's sister, Lucy Ann Chapin, owned the first piano west of Detroit and that Potawatomies used to gather almost daily at her home on 17 South Main St. (about where Goodyear's is today) to listen outside the window and dance as she played. But apart from the fragmentary glimpses contained in anecdotes like these, we don't know very much.

One of the few early settlers who regarded the local Indians with sympathy and persistent curiosity was the Reverend Friedrich Schmid, the founding pastor of Ann Arbor's Bethlehem Church, the first German-language church in Michigan. Upon graduating from the Evangelical Missionary Institute of Basel, Switzerland, the young Schmid had hoped for an assignment to work among primitive peoples, in South America, perhaps. Instead, he was sent to minister to Michigan's stolid German immigrants. Schmid arrived in Ann Arbor in 1833. His letters to his superiors in Basel are filled with references to the Indians. Schmid admired the Indians' ability to eat heartily when food was available and live on little when it was not, and to sleep wherever they could lay a blanket. He understood their attachment to the land and pitied them for being driven from one place to another. When the first Bethlehem Church was built, he noted that it occupied land that once belonged to Indians.

Schmid's great dream was to convert the Indians to Christianity. In letter after letter, he begged for an assistant so he could have time to work with the Indians. He never got an assistant, but in 1845, as president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Michigan, he was able to set up an Indian mission at Sebewaing in Huron county. In 1847 three Indians from this mission were brought to Ann Arbor to be baptized; two of them stayed here, one to become a tailor, the other a shoemaker.

Schmid depicts Indians in general terms and provides little specific information to differentiate the Potawatomie he encountered here from other Indian peoples. That even a man with a lively interest in Indian life should prove unable to distinguish the Indians around him with much sharpness of detail, let alone to imagine a way of Christianizing them that built on, rather than supplanted, their native culture, suggests that by the time of his arrival in this area there was little left of Indian life to salvage.

The next Ann Arborite to show an active interest in the Indians was the amateur archaeologist Wilbert Hinsdale, born in 1851, eleven years after the Indians had left the county. He was dean of U-M's Homeopathic Medical School until it was closed in 1922, at which time he was appointed to head the University Museum's Division of Michigan Archaeology. At this time, stimulated in part by his wife's collection of Indian baskets, he became interested in the history of local Indians. He developed contacts all over the state with people who shared his interest in Indians. With their help he did the pioneer work in mapping sites and trails and collecting artifacts. Some of his findings were only by word of mouth, and others have disappeared. As a result, not all his research can be authenticated, but he is still highly regarded by scholars who have come after him.

Hinsdale's The Indians of Washtenaw County, Michigan, published in 1927, remains the only book written specifically on the Indians of this area. It includes information on the Indians' history and culture, pictures of artifacts, and a map showing the sites of villages, burying grounds, mounds,

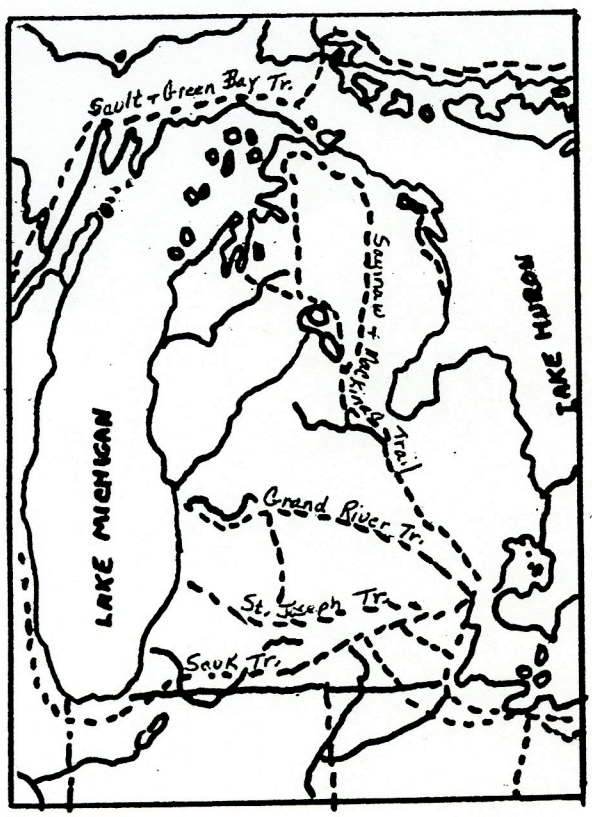
garden beds, and trails he was able to discover. The trail sites still figure prominently in contemporary life, since many of our streets follow old Indian trails. Hinsdale's map shows twelve Indian trails crossing through Ann Arbor, and these correspond with all the major streets leaving the city: Packard, Main, Liberty, Dexter, Miller, Huron River Drive, Whitmore Lake Road, Pontiac Trail, Geddes, and Washtenaw.

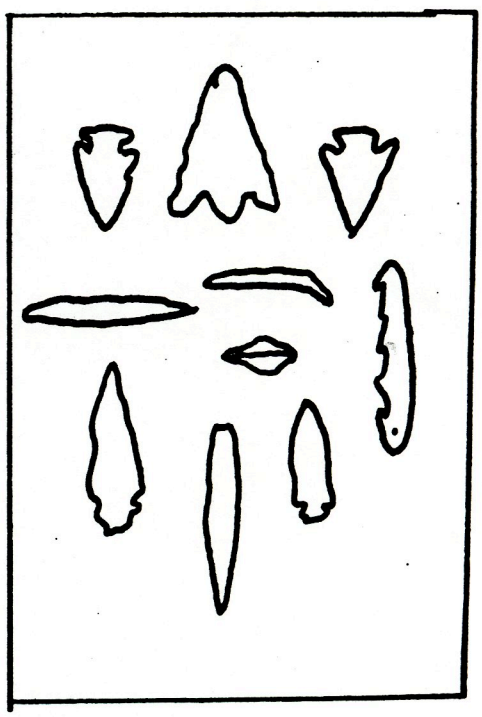
The most important Indian trail in Ann Arbor was Liberty, a part of the St. Joseph Trail that crossed the Lower Peninsula from the mouth of the Huron River at Lake Erie to St. Joseph. Another important local trail was the Sauk, which connected Detroit with Chicago along what is today US-12. Three of Ann Arbor's Indian trails met at the Huron River where the Broadway Bridge now stands. In 1924 the Sons of the American Revolution erected a marker commemorating the trail on the bridge's northeast side. In West Park there is a remnant of the trail that ran to Dexter, and the Wolverine Boy Scout Council maintains for hiking part of an old Potawatomie trail in the Pinckney Recreation Area.

Apart from comparatively few artifacts in the University Museum, these trails are about all that is left to show that Indians once lived here. The paths helped white settlers get here and, ironically, thereby hastened the Indians departure.

INDIAN ARTIFACTS FOUND IN ANN ARBOR

Bows and arrows were a fairly late Indian invention. Many triangular-shaped pieces of stone found in the Ann Arbor area look like arrowheads but were actually tools used for piercing or chopping. They were made of chert, a stone which lends itself to this kind of shaping and is plentiful here, thanks to the last glacier. Some local artifacts are made of superior types of chert from Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and the Niagara area. This means that the prehistoric Indians lying here must have traveled or traded fairly far from home. G.S.





MEMORIES OF C. E. WOODARD

In 1893, December 20, we have this from C.E. Woodard, Surveyor. He says: "It is now over 63 years since I came into Washtenaw County. It was then nearly an unbroken wilderness. " 'Lo the poor Indians had nearly abandoned his happy hunting grounds in these parts and gone west. Except in the Fall of the year when he took up his line of March along his well beaten trail towards Fort Malden, Ontario Canada to receive his annuity and then return. He was seldom seen.

At the time of Black Hawk War, the few scattered settlers were naturally alarmed at the apparent activity among the Indians. At times, hundreds might be seen camped on the banks of the Huron near the East Public Square (south side of East Michigan at Park Street) and on the Gilbert farm, now Harwood farm, 4 miles west of town. (West Michigan Avenue at Platt Road) and near the Northeast corner of section 27, part of the 600 acre Harwood farm. But I do not remember ever hearing of anyone ever being molested by them or even trouble by their begging for food for the land then was alive with all kinds of wild game and plenty of meat could be had for the killing of it. They were better off than their white brothers being better hunters. Soon after the War with Great Britain, say about 1815, the Government lands of this State-then Territory-were being surveyed. These Surveyors were instructed, among other things, to note the point of crossing of these trails by their section lines so that they might be laid out on the Government Plat. Had they done their duty faithfully, an enormous amount of time and expenditure of money might have been saved to those who have since undertaken this work with almost unbelievable success. It was always understood that our most important Highways-the Chicago Road and others followed

the general lines of these main Indian Trails, thus admitting the Indians' skill on their part in Civil Engineering, selecting the best ground on which to locate our Highways. The main Trail going thru Ypsilanti was more or less used as an Indian Trail down to 1834 and their Camp Grounds plainly marked by the ashes of the Camps and the then standing of the Poles of the Wigwams.

On the Gilbert Farm, 4 miles west of town, and which became the big Harwood farm, was one of these Camps near where Mr. Woodard was then living.

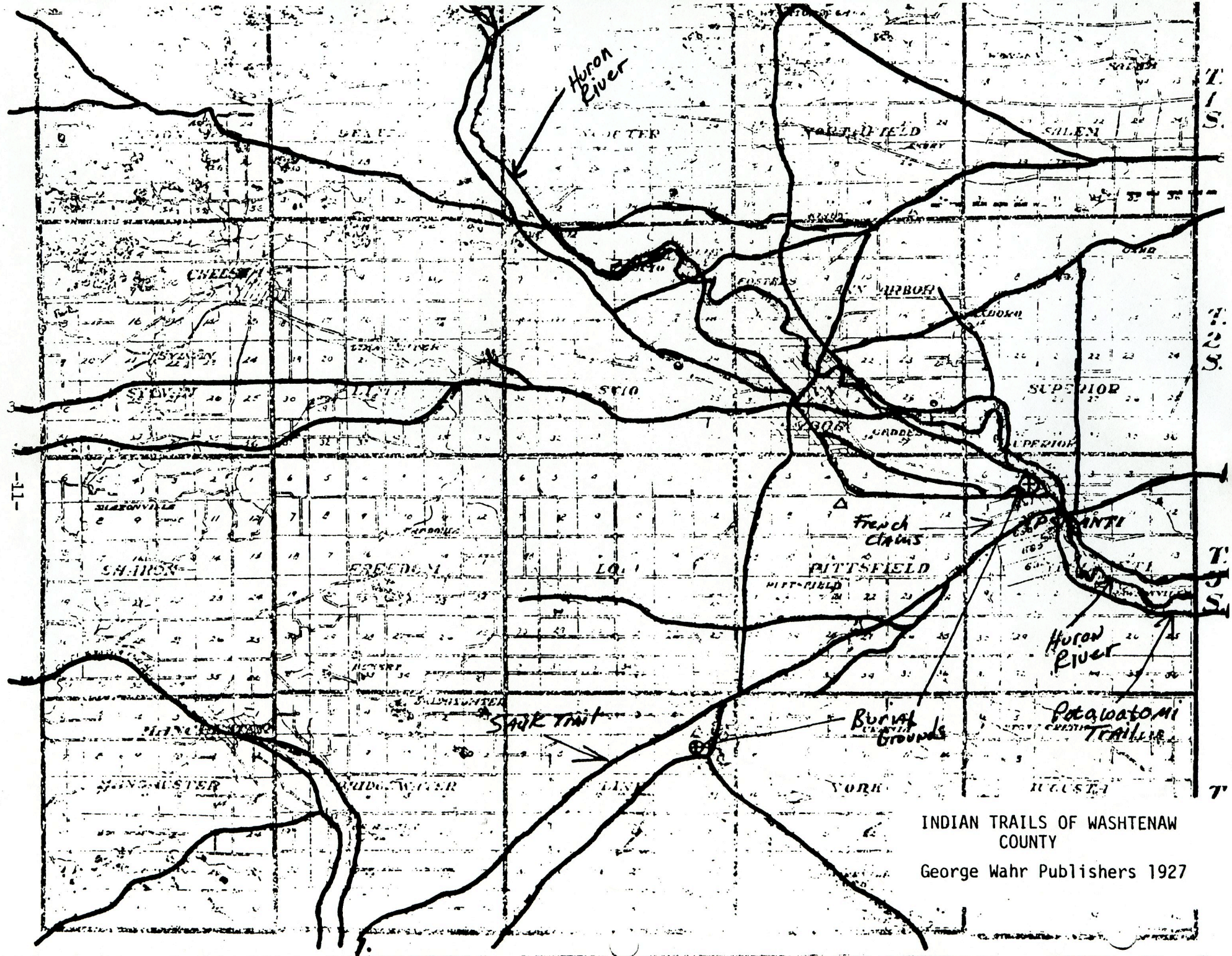
In the summer of 1848, Mr. Woodard with his party of Surveyors, while on the Government land surveys of the Upper Peninsular, were stationed at the mouth of Iron River, Lake Superior. Their supplies were packed on horseback over the Great Gogebic Trail as their surveys were in the vicinity of Lake Goebec. On the shores of that beautiful Lake, were the camping and burial grounds of the Indians still in the country. No wonder they lingered around these lovely spots where their dead were sleeping, their graves simply but beautifully decorated.

In 1850, while on the Government Surveys on Thunder Bay, provisions and supplies were packed on horseback over the trails in that vicinity. On the trail from there to Alpena at Squa Bay still lived a large family of Indians. The father "Shegoneto" was said to be 106 years old, and was then a fine specimen of his race.

Mr. Woodard writes: "Nearly half a century my profession has called me into many lands once the home of the Indians and over many a mile in Michigan and in northern Wisconsin. Had I the time to recount some of these wanderings, it would be foreign to the subject in hand so I stop."

When Mr. Isaac Kimbal came to Michigan in 1828, he went from Detroit to Flat Rock on the Huron River. He knew that a man by the name of Tubbs lived up this river not far from Geddes. He hired an Indian to go with him and says: "We went up the river on the west side about three miles, crossed over coming up on the East side 8 or 9 miles, then crossed back to the West side and up to Belleville. Crossed back and up the East side to Woodruffs' Grove. Then came up on the west side across what is now Mrs. Swift's grounds (Gilbert Residence, 203 South Huron) thru a little west of the now business part of the town and on to Geddes where we again crossed over and found our man a little Northwest of Geddes.

The Indians of 1840-50 were Pottawatamies and they had good settlements on the lower Huron River, good log houses and fine cattle. This was on the trails going East from Ypsilanti. There were 3 or more of these Trails.



INDIAN TRAILS OF WASHTENAW COUNTY

George Wahr Publishers 1927